

The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women

Lawrence Public Hearing REPORT

*On November 20, 2002,
The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women
held its 11th public hearing
in Lawrence, Massachusetts,
at the Psychological Center
One Union Street.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to
listen to the concerns of
women, girls, and organizations in Northern Massachusetts.*

*The Commission hopes that the
comments, feedback, and input of the participants
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns
facing women and girls in our state.*

Attendees

Commissioners

Kathleen Casavant
Marianne Fleckner, Chair
Donna Finneran
Fran Hogan
Elaine Guiney
Dianne Luby
Nilka Álvarez-Rodríguez
Susana Segat
Minosca Alcántara
Roseanna Means

Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Staff

Paula Daddona, Acting Executive Director

Participants from the Community

Susan Santos, Women of Excellence
Anita Lewkeet, Unite311 MVP
Melissa Glassman, Tri-City Mental Health Homeless Services
Veronica Holmes, Lawrence Methuen Community Coalition
Courtney Snegroff, SEIU
Mary Beth Hermans, Family Literacy Initiative
Dr. Jacqueline Harris, Supportive Care Inc.
Judy De Jesus, The Northeast Independent Living Program
Rose Gonzalez, Lawrence Grassroots Initiative
Barbara Dodge, Greater Lawrence Family Health Center
Jan Burkholder, aid to Senator Sue Tucker
Marina Acosta, YWCA
Carmen A. Colon
Carmen Diaz
Erulata Mercedes
Jacqueline Rivera
Kathleen Casiano
Maria Molino
Flora Ramirez
Girela Cupeles
Jose L. Quintero
Adelaida De Jesus
Carmen Amill
Quelis Figueroa, Women's Resource Center
Samantha Zellinger, Women's Resource Center

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Participants from the Community, Continued

Linda Cameau, YWCA of Greater Lawrence

Anne D'Errico, GLCAC

Kathleen Casiano

Exodita, Ánimo

Yarula Hueilas, Ánimo

Beatriz Vargas, Ánimo

Doris Luciani, Family Services

Portia Simmons

Opening Remarks

Welcome and Introduction by Commissioner Roseanna Means

Commissioner Means introduced herself and thanked the attendees for coming. She thanked the Psychological Center, Mayor Sullivan of Lawrence and Commissioner Álvarez-Rodríguez for hosting the hearing and providing press coverage. She also thanked Anita Lewkeet for providing translation services for the hearing. Commissioner Means extended the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women's thanks to the sponsoring organizations of the hearing: the GLAC, Head Start and Community Partnership Programs, Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, the Tri-City Advocacy Program, Ánimo Leadership Institute, Lawrence Methuen Community Coalition, Lawrence Weed and Seed Coalition, Merrimack Minority Employment, Merrimack Valley Consumer Advisory Board, the Psychological Center, Supportive Care, Women's Agenda, Women of Excellence, Women's Resource Center, and the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. Commissioner Means explained that the hearing was for the purpose of listening to any and all concerns of the women of Greater Lawrence. She invited those people who might be shy about speaking in public to use the issue boards set up to post a written note about their concerns. She explained that all the testimony collected at the hearing would be compiled and sent to the Governor, the Speaker of the House, the President of the Senate and the members of the Women's Legislative Caucus.

Summary of Testimony

The following summaries are based on note-takers at the meeting, staff transcribing the audiocassette recording of the testimony, and written testimony provided by those who did not speak.

Courtney Snegroff and Heather McCall, SEIU

Ms. Snegroff introduced herself as a representative of the SEIU and said that she and Ms. McCall were testifying on behalf of Sherry Latham, a former application developer with the Lawrence Public Schools, who was unable to be at the hearing that evening. She expressed her concern that Ms. Latham and many of her coworkers had been laid off by the Lawrence Public Schools after they had begun a union drive. The union drive had been started in response to the workers loss of their longevity payments and their sick and vacation time.

Ms. McCall noted that the approximately 60 workers who were involved in the dispute over unions with the Lawrence Public Schools were the only group out of 2,000 employees that were not unionized. She also noted that 75% of the employees involved were women. Both Ms. McCall and Ms. Snegroff expressed their desire to obtain what they felt was fair and right for the employees.

Ms. Snegroff submitted the following in writing

My name is CS, I work w/ SEIU.

I'm here on behalf of Sherry Latham who was the application developer at the Lawrence Public Schools. Unfortunately Sherry couldn't be here tonight b/c one of her children is sick.

Sherry had worked in the public schools of Lawrence for almost 10 years & was laid off a few months ago, immediately after she began a union drive at the school. Sherry has three children, all of whom have now lost their healthcare coverage.

Upon learning about Sherry's efforts to get union representation for the 60 unrepresented workers of which about 75% are women she was laid off & replaced by a male consultant who was hired for 5X's the amt that She had made.

Sherry initiated the union drive after she & her coworkers was deprived her longevity payment. Management also illegally took away her & her coworkers' sick and vacation time.

Sherry was not the only woman with a family who was laid off after she had begun her union activism, & management continues to target the remaining workers through threats & intimidation.

It is these women's right under the law to have union representation if they so wish & yet management is doing everything in their power to hinder their efforts.

If there's anything that anyone on this commission or in the audience can do to support these women workers & to get management to stop their unfair labor practices please talk to me after this hearing.

Thank you.

Courtney Snegroff
Heather McCall

Barbara Dodge, *Greater Lawrence Family Health Center*

Ms. Dodge introduced herself as a representative of the Ánimo Community Leadership Program with the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center. She expressed her concern over the lack of affordable housing in the area. She testified that since her marriage dissolved due to domestic violence, she has had trouble paying the rent on a single income, despite living in a subsidized apartment. Ms. Dodge noted that the one-bedroom apartments in her area cost \$875 to \$925 a month, not including utilities.

Veronica Holmes, *Lawrence Methuen Community Coalition*

Ms. Holmes introduced herself as a representative of the Lawrence Methuen Community Coalition. She expressed her concerns about the difficulty of obtaining child support payments and how easy it is for an ex-spouse to find ways around his obligation by moving around or arranging to be paid under the table. She expressed the belief that it should not be the woman's responsibility to keep track of her ex-husband and report on his whereabouts to the Department of Revenue in order to receive child support payments.

Marina Molina, *Community Leader*

Ms. Molina testified with the assistance of a translator

Ms. Molina expressed her concern that those people who had experienced problems with drugs and the law in the past were unable to qualify for affordable housing and that this made it that much harder for them to stay sober and work to make their lives better.

Jose Quintero, *President of the Merrimack Valley Consumer Advisory Board*

Mr. Quintero expressed his concern about the lack of affordable housing in Lawrence.

Susan Santos, *Women of Excellence*

Ms. Santos expressed her concern about the lack of affordable housing and the overcrowding that resulted when people who had lost their homes moved in with relatives. She was concerned about the mothers who were unable to pay for after school care for their children, but did not qualify for free after school care because they were not on welfare. She also expressed her concerns that those people with criminal records who were trying to move on with their lives and better themselves were unable to do so because they had so much trouble finding a job because of their criminal records. She stated that she felt something needed to be done, perhaps laws needed to be changed, so that these people would have a chance to achieve something in their life.

Portia Simmons, *Community Volunteer and Member of Various Local Boards*

Ms. Simmons was concerned about the discrepancy between the quality and price of the Section Eight housing offered in Lawrence and the Section Eight housing offered in other nearby communities. She felt that the landlords in Lawrence charged a large amount of money for housing that was poor quality. She also expressed her concern over the trouble her son was having getting a job at the local hospital, because of some time he spent in jail when he was 17.

Linda Comeau, *YWCA of Greater Lawrence*

Ms. Comeau introduced herself as the Assistant Director of Housing Services at the YWCA of Greater Lawrence. She testified that the lack of affordable housing was getting to be a crisis in Lawrence. She said that many women could not get housing and those that could often could not pay the security deposit, which was regularly \$1200 to \$1800. She said that something had to be done in terms of rent control. She pointed out that many landlords were running credit checks on women, who of course had poor credit or poor CORIs due to their circumstances. She said that women were often asked by

landlords where the man of the house was, if as they could not be self-sufficient on their own.

Melissa Glassman, *Tri-City Mental Health Homeless Services*

Ms. Glassman introduced herself as being from Tri-City Mental Health Homeless Services. She said she worked with the homeless in Lawrence and Haverhill and had been homeless herself in the past. She said that there were many families who were doubled up in single apartments in the area, but were not counted as homeless. She would like to see more intervention and prevention of homelessness as opposed to placing families in area motels. She would like to see the money spent on motels used to permanently place families in homes instead. She said that many families were placed far away from their area, which made it hard to find resources and that she wanted to see support services put into place to prevent reoccurring homelessness. She would like to see the laws changed to speed up the process of freeing abandoned buildings and land to be renovated. She said she was also concerned about the impending cuts in basic Mass Health.

Doris Luciani, *Program Coordinator, Environmental Program at Family Services*

Ms. Luciani said she was here to testify on behalf of herself and her friends, many of who could not attend the hearing because they had to work a second job in order to pay the rent. She expressed her frustration and pain that whenever she was paid, she had to put 50% of her paycheck towards paying the rent. She said she imagines being able to work and not having to save \$25 in case her car breaks down, because if it does she will not be able to work. She said it was very hard to have to work so much so that her children could live in a safe neighborhood and to pay all the money she was paying, but still not be able to afford a safe neighborhood for her children. She said she did try to buy a home, but homes are very expensive and she could not find anything on the market for the amount of money for which she was approved. Ms. Luciani said that she educates people in the community about environmental problems and how they affect people's health, causing learning disabilities, behavior problems, cancer, asthma and lead poisoning, among other problems. She would like to see Lawrence become an environmental justice area. She said that there are a lot of women in the community who are fighting very hard and do not want to go back into the system. They do not want any type of assistance. They really want to make it on their own.

Judy De Jesus, *The Northeast Independent Living Program*

Ms. De Jesus introduced herself as a skills specialist who provided services to people with disabilities at the Northeast Independent Living Program. She testified about her frustration about the lack of housing and shelters available for people with disabilities. She said that there were not many shelters that could accommodate someone in a wheelchair, and those that could were often far away and there was no transportation to get the wheelchair-bound person to the shelter. She said that she also worked with people who had vouchers and a set income that they collected monthly, but were still losing their housing when the rents skyrocketed.

Beatriz Vargas, Ms. Vargas testified with the assistance of a translator

Ms. Vargas expressed her concern that something needed to be done to lower the rents, which were very high. She said that the rent was too high and she was struggling to survive. She testified that the landlord kept raising her rent but did not do any repairs. This year her rent has gone up by \$100. She pays \$875 per month. She said that the utilities were not included and this added as much as \$450 to her payments. She said that her situation was made even harder by the fact that she is on disability. She reiterated her desire for the government to do something to affect some sort of rent control.

Ann D'Errico, G. L. C. A. C.

Ms. D'Errico introduced herself as a representative of Greater Lawrence Head Start and stated that she was previously the Deputy Director of Housing for Lawrence and involved with the Lead Abatement program. She said that the problems that the Commissioners were hearing about tonight were huge. She stated that Lawrence had an approximate population of 85,000. The Lawrence population was growing exponentially because people in Lowell and Haverhill were being given Section Eight vouchers that were worth more money than those given in Lawrence. She said people on Section Eight from Andover and North Andover were also being sent to Lawrence for housing. She asked why a Lawrence landlord would take a Lawrence voucher when he knew that he could get a Lowell voucher worth \$1200.

She said that housing in Lawrence is continuing to get worse, new housing cannot be created, the population is growing and something needs to be done. She said that the situation was basically illegal. Section Eight in Lawrence has been put on hold for five years. She said that no matter who comes into the community, no one is able to get a Section Eight voucher in Lawrence. Ms. D'Errico testified that the population density of Lawrence was 12,000 per square mile and that the average income was less than \$16,000 a year. The rent is going up to \$1,000 a month. She asked how families could afford to pay that much money. She said that there were messages that needed to be sent to the Governor's office. Stop cutting vouchers for people who are trying to go to work so they can get proper childcare. These people need childcare vouchers. In Head Start, Ms. D'Errico said she had 515 families, 15% of which were homeless. She said that with MassHealth being cut these people could not get glasses or dental work. She said that Lawrence is number one in the country for lead poisoning. She stated that urban blight in the city is related to roaches and asthma. Their children suffer. She said that all these problems were related to the lack of housing in the city. She said that the Governor had to look at what he was doing. She said that what he was doing was driving six square miles of poverty into the city of Lawrence out of the other towns.

Carmen Diaz, Ms. Diaz testified with the help of Portia Simmons

Ms. Diaz testified that she was currently living on the street. She said that before Catholic Charities had helped her pay her rent, but that they had run out of money. She said that she applied for housing in both Lawrence and Lowell, but there were so many people that the man said that she would have to wait ten years. She told him that in ten years she would be in the grave. She said that she had housing for the next two months,

but then she would have to find somewhere else to live and she did not want to live on the street. She said that when she stayed in the shelters, she did not get to sleep until 3 a.m. She said that many of the people in the shelters were alcoholics and drug addicts, and she never drank or used drugs. She felt that this was not fair for anyone.

Ms. Simmons stated that Ms. Diaz had been very sick and had been in and out of the hospital. She said that for Ms. Diaz to return to living on the streets might be fatal.

Ms. Diaz said that she had spent the whole summer in the hospital. She said that it was not fair that she had to be in the hospital for so long and then live on the streets because no one could help her.

Issue Boards

Participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing. The topics covered by the Issue Boards were: Child Care, Economic Development/Stability, Girls' Issues, Violence Against Women, and Other.

The following is a verbatim transcription of the comments posted on the various boards.

Child Care

Daycare keeps going up in \$

Economic Development/Stability

No comments posted

Girls' Issues

No comments posted

Health Care

No comments posted

Violence Against Women

No comments posted

Other

Housing. The Rents are too high and not 1 single mother can pay for the rent herself. She needs to have more people to live with to make ends meet. We need help!

Condemned homes in Law that should be fixed.

Also wants happening to the streets in Law that are not clean.

Wanted to express more on Rent Control in Lawrence

The following was sent in an e-mail to the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women from Jacqueline Rivera, entitled I WANT MY VOICE HEARD! The e-mail was written in all capital letters.

My name is Jacqueline Rivera, I was at your meeting on Nov. 20, 2002 at Lawrence. I will like to see rent control come back cause there are to many homeless people and I don't think is fair for the poor people.

I also will like to see something be done with the mass health issues. Why if there is a young girl who works part time and don't make much money they can't get help from mass health unless they pregnant. If welfare does not help young mothers with kids any more, why will they say if you not disable or pregnant we can't help you with mass health.

My daughter have applied for mass health and has been denied over and over just because she is not pregnant, so she does not qualify. I don't think is fair.

Thank you for taking the time to hear me.
Jacqueline Rivera